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HEADLINE: Our public schools: Separate and unequal;
A school day in the life of two middle school students

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Against a backdrop of graffiti, Gerry Silva plays football on the playground at Oakland's Havenscourt Middle School. Alexene Farol [top] walks through spotless corridors to her class at Harvest Park Middle School in Pleasanton. NICK LAMMERS Staff photos Gerry Silva walks past the F-word in bright red, 6-inch, upper-case letters scrawled eye-level on the wall as he trots down the Havenscourt Middle School stairway, the one at the far end of the hall from the main entrance. The tall eighth-grader wearing the unofficial school uniform of a T-shirt and jeans, stops halfway down the steps to glance back when asked about the expletive. He shrugs and says he doesn't know how long it's been there. He doesn't always take that stairway, he adds, a puzzled look flashing across his face -- an expression prompted by the question rather than the profanity. In a rough count, the F-word is scrawled or scratched onto more than two dozen surfaces at the two-story public middle school at 66th Avenue and International Boulevard in Oakland. Reducing graffiti isn't among the three goals of the elected student body officers at Havenscourt this year, according to Gerry, 14, the elected vice president who says he's really the acting president because the elected president doesn't do anything. According to the acting president-vice president, the three actual goals are: - "Make sure that nobody stays in the same grade two years in a row." - "And that everybody comes to school on time and nobody misses a lot of days." - "Try to stop the fighting." The path to those lofty goals is left unsaid. The bell for first period is ringing.

Just 20 miles away and a few days earlier, 14-year-old Alexene Farol steps out of her mom's white Nissan Quest minivan outside the black iron gates at Harvest Park Middle School in Pleasanton. The F-word was etched into the paint on those iron gates a year or so ago, but few students saw it. District workers were out that afternoon to blast it away and repaint. A few minutes before 8:30 a.m., Alexene heads past the entrance to the public school's inner courtyard where she takes a circuitous and angular route around manicured patches of grass via intersecting sidewalks to get to American history class. It would be faster to cut across the large sections of lawn -- lush and uniformly gardener green -- but no one does at Harvest Park. You can't walk on the grass, explains Alexene, the student body vice president. Even if you trip or accidentally step on the grass, the yard supervisors yell to get off, the eighth-grader adds, rolling her eyes in a conspiratorial teenage "whatever" look. Once inside her first-period room, Alexene sets her pink JanSport backpack on the blue carpet next to her second-row desk, which has a copy of the glossy faced state-sanctioned textbook "Call to Freedom" sitting on top. All the desks do. Alexene has another copy of the history book at home along with copies of all the textbooks for each of her classes. All the kids do. Just before the 8:35 a.m. bell, most of the students are seated in

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their desks, their backpacks on the floor. Alexene faces the back of the classroom as she huddles with a group of students to compare Internet sources for a class project. A television -- set into a multimedia wall unit that includes overlapping whiteboards and shelving -- is tuned to MSNBC before a student switches to the school's own channel, called HPTV -- Harvest Park TV. Suddenly, a picture of the American flag flashes on the screen, and Alexene and her classmates stand in unison and recite the "Pledge of Allegiance." The flag disappears, replaced by two students sitting behind a desk, their hands clasped on the table in front of them. They read the day's announcements -- a live broadcast from the school's media room -- advising students about the upcoming renaissance fair, some student fund-raisers and a handful of wrestling team victories. At the end of the broadcast, Gayle King, a teacher of 30 years, calls for the students to exchange homework on the pre-Civil War South. After reading the answers, King calls out student names to note their scores in her grade book, pausing on one girl to say, "I got your e-mail, but you need to come up and see me." King then tells the students to work on homework or their pending history report. Alexene opts for homework while King helps other students find and print Internet pages using the iMac and color printer on her desk -- a technological combination all the teachers have, compliments of the PTA. The PTA also ponied up \$32,000 this year for 32 white eMacs for computer teacher Bill Ragsdale's classroom. Those computers replaced 32 colorful and bulbous iMacs that teachers and students now use on a drop-in basis in two nearby classrooms. Alexene doesn't take computer class, although she does carry a laptop in her backpack, along with her brown-bag lunch and her flute. She's not, however, one of the 180 students who also carry their own Apple iBook laptops each day to Harvest Park and who voluntarily participate in a program that incorporates the laptops in the curriculum -- a feat made easier with the school's wireless Internet access.

On the way to first period, Gerry heads outside the main building and into the inner courtyard at Havenscourt. There's a waist-high patch of weeds adjacent to the building and two scruffy areas of patchy grass in the middle. Across the courtyard is the locked door of the school's new computer lab, housed in an old shop classroom. Inside the narrow, dark room, 32 newly unpacked and smudge-free CompuServe computers line the walls. They have sat unused since the school got them with district funds more than a year ago because school officials discovered mold in the room. It's taken months to eliminate the mold and rebuild the classroom. A sign on the main office's counter says, "Computer lab coming soon." With about a month of school left, Vice Principal Ramon Honea says he's hoping to open the lab up before school lets out. Gerry was one of a few students selected to help install the computers in the lab, as well as the individual CompuServe computers each teacher received earlier in the year -- although some teachers are still waiting for Internet access in their classrooms. Gerry continues past the computer lab, through the doors of another wing of classrooms adjacent to the main building and into the double-sized room for first period. The seven students there, including Gerry, are "resource" students. Resource means special education. Gerry has a learning disability. He repeated third grade, but his reading skills are below his grade level, and the resource class is supposed to give him the focused attention he needs. As Gerry drops his backpack and sits at his desk, teacher Kamila Weaver writes "geography" in purple erasable marker on the whiteboard. She asks the students to find words within the word. She starts a list on the board from student suggestions. Rap. Rag. Graph. Pay. Hog.

Then she stops writing, her marker poised in the air as her attention turns to a light tapping sound about five feet away. Water is dripping from the seam of an exposed ceiling duct and hitting the pock-marked tiled floor 12 feet below -- an irregular drip that contradicts the constant and quiet drizzle outside the window.

Class instructional aide Ruby Clifton puts a piece of white binderpaper under the drops to soak up the water while Weaver and the students go back to staring at the purple "geography." Hag. Harp. Page. A total of 43 before giving up 15 minutes later.

A five-minute debate ensues as the class decides which movie to watch for the party scheduled the next day. It's down to Disney's "The Emperor's New Groove" or the Adam Sandler comedy "Mr. Deeds." They agree to decide the next day.

A lesson on prefixes, suffixes and root words follows.

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"What is a pedestrian?" Weaver asks. No hands raise. Silence. Gerry stares at the word his teacher has now written on the board, a complete lack of recognition on his face.

Uncredentialed, Weaver is teaching at Havenscourt while she attends the University of San Francisco to get her teaching credential and a master's degree. That means she is an intern - not yet fully qualified to teach by state standards, but teaching full time in the meantime.

Three of Gerry's four teachers don't have teaching credentials. The fourth, his physical education teacher, is the only one who does.

"A pedestrian is a person that's walking," Weaver finally answers, her voice devoid of impatience or boredom.

Water continues to plop onto the soggy binder paper nearby.

At the bell, Alexene grabs her backpack and walks another right-angled route to second-period band class at Harvest Park. She takes her front-row seat with the other six or so flute players. As dozens of students file in after her, the room fills with a cacophony of musical notes - the high-pitched peeps and squeaks of flutes and clarinets competing with the warm-up honks and toots of the trumpets, saxophones and a tuba or two.

Band is one of Alexene's two chosen electives. The other is leadership class, but she could have chosen French, Spanish, yearbook, two- or three-dimensional art, journalism, speech and drama, media, computers, community service, consumer skills, word processing, "exploring technology" or "teens and family."

A lot of Harvest Park kids pick band. Each school day, six classes of award-winning bands file through teacher Paul Perazzo's acoustically modified classroom - with more than 225 students playing one instrument or another.

"Music is really big," eight-year teaching veteran Perazzo says of the school's program. "They're totally into it here.

The instrumental music parents are the biggest lobby in the district. If the district tried to cut music, I don't know. There'd be a huge backlash."

In the school chorus room is a testament to Perazzo's words: a new \$4,000 Yamaha upright piano. The Harvest Park PTA bought it for chorus teacher Diana Sprague - a surprise gesture sprung on her the day before spring break.

After first period, Gerry walks by the art classroom at Havenscourt.

Only sixth-graders take art.

And Gerry isn't among the 15 students in band class at Havenscourt.

The district requires all students who read at two years below grade level to take reading intervention class instead of an elective.

About 80 of the 738 students are allowed to take an elective - a choice of Spanish, chorus, band or woodshop.

On his way to second period, Gerry walks past a spigotless drinking fountain, outside and back into the main building.

Through the halls, he is barraged by hellos and hand slaps from boys and girls from all grades, all ethnicities.

One seventh-grader, short for his age, goes out of his way to slap Gerry's hand with a rowdy, "Hey, Gerry!" It is the first of what will be a dozen such greetings from this same boy during the day. Gerry shakes his head, rolls his eyes in mock frustration before his face breaks out into a broad smile as he returns the greeting, with a hand slap and a

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hello before walking into his second period class.

The younger boy looks to be about half Gerry's size, the kind of small middle school kid that typically is the butt of cruel jokes and taunts unless he establishes an alliance with a guy like Gerry.

At the bell, Gerry walks into his core English and history class, where teacher Adam Rosenthal is prompting students to get to the task of fixing grammatical and spelling errors in a sentence projected onto a piece of construction paper taped to the whiteboard.

A semi-truck idles at the red light down on the street below - a sound repeated with nearly every light cycle.

A girl sitting near Gerry stares into space, flicking her pencil on her desk.

"Just try," Rosenthal says to her in a barely audible voice. "That's all I ask."

This is Rosenthal's second and last year teaching. He is a Teach for America teacher - one of a few thousand fresh college graduates who make a two- to three-year commitment to teach in rural and urban schools across the country. He's going to law school next year.

There are nine Teach for America teachers at Havenscourt. They are among the 15 teachers at the school who don't have teaching credentials.

On the walls of Rosenthal's classroom are student-made posters of colleges and universities they researched - Spelman, Yale, Stanford, all the University of California campuses. In the corner, Rosenthal has hung his diploma from UCLA along with a school pennant.

On another wall are posters that read "Bill of Rights," "How to Get to College" and "How to Be an Artist."

Gerry says he wants to go to college to study technology and business.

Maybe at UC Davis or the University of Miami.

He faces long odds.

Of the nearly 500 Latino males like Gerry who entered an Oakland high school in 1998, just 29 graduated four years later with the credits and classes that would qualify them to attend a University of California or California State University campus.

Alexene "of course" wants to attend college.

Stanford University, she says.

The odds are against her. She must maintain through high school the perfect grades she now gets at Harvest Park Middle School, then score near perfect on the SAT. She must participate in community service, leadership and extracurricular activities - and there's still no guarantee Stanford will take her.

Her role as vice president and fourth-period leadership class is a head start toward that goal, though.

Leadership students at Harvest Park are active in many areas outside the classroom, helping with fund-raising, school events, dances and the like. The student body government had a goal of hosting a district-wide middle school dance this year, but it didn't work out.

Alexene also has a head start on her college applications with the classes she's taking, including honors math and English - which means plenty of homework. "If I'm not staring off into space, I can get it done pretty quickly,"

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Alexene says of the daily at-home assignments. "Like two or three hours.

Sometimes more, especially if she has to study for a test.

In third-period science class, teacher Aileen Parsons is grilling students on endothermic and exothermic reactions - which will be on a test the next day.

"An example of an endothermic reaction?" asks Parsons, a teacher for 17 years.

"A cake baking," Alexene answers from her chair at one of the classroom's lab tables equipped with a built-in faucet and gas burner, used a few times a week for hands-on experiments.

"I want you to get comfortable with this so when you get to highschool, you won't say, 'I've never seen this before,'" Parsons says, smiling.

"You guys, you're all going to be living in a van down by the river unless you learn this."

Gerry lives with his mother and twin brother in the new public housing across the street from Havenscourt - rows of burnt sienna, turquoise and cream-colored buildings that look like suburban townhouses.

These apartments replaced the old, gray barrack-like buildings from the now boarded-up housing project down the street.

The new housing startles the neighborhood with its bright splashes of color, straight angles, new pavement, perfectly spaced plants and overall sense of tidiness.

The bright Southwestern color scheme hasn't seeped into the neighborhood, where the streets are literally splashed with the red of human blood.

There were 15 murders within a mile of Havenscourt last year. Gerry saw two of them, both shootings.

Drugs, Gerry says with a shrug, because it's the most obvious answer to why. Going toward 70th Avenue there's a lot of drugs, he adds by way of explanation.

There was one incident in February when the uncle of a kid from Gerry's math class was killed a few blocks away and the whole school went into lockdown while police swarmed the neighborhood.

Second-year and uncredentialed teacher Dove Granese teaches Gerry's fourth-period science class.

Sitting at a four-person cluster of tables in her class, Gerry pulls out his science book.

Granese, waves her arms, alternating between shouting, chastising, berating and encouraging as she paces the room. She's quizzing the students on the periodic table and the reason the elements have different atomic numbers.

A row of sinks and countertops line the wall, presumably for science experiments. The countertops, however, are filled with papers and student projects. The sinks are rusted and covered with dust.

An Alhambra bottled water dispenser is in the back of the room.

Students chip in \$1 per month or so to pay for the water. They do that because most of the school's water fountains don't work, Gerry explains.

Gerry hands \$1 to Granese before packing his backpack and heading to lunch.

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At lunch, Alexene sits at a table with seven other girls on the edge of the school's designated eating area, a large sheltered pavilion.

From her backpack, she pulls out a brown-bag lunch packed earlier that morning on the kitchen counter at her home in a nearby Pleasanton subdivision. A middle-class enclave, where the streets are named mostly after flowers, she lives there with her mom, stepdad and two younger siblings.

Alexene's mom made the roast beef sandwich in her bag, which also holds grapes, Capri Sun juice, and a bag of spicy trail mix.

Meanwhile, other students spill out of the meticulously organized cafeteria carrying Domino's pizza, hamburgers, soda, juice, chips and a variety of other snacks and meals.

Six of the eight girls at Alexene's table have braces.

Alexene isn't one of them.

"I get mine on April 30th," she says, pointing to a crooked upper tooth in her mouth.

After about 15 minutes laughing and chatting with her friends, Alexene, heads to the school library. She needs a book to read that night for English class.

More than a dozen students are in the library, working on one of 17 computers and milling around the book stacks.

Alexene heads to one of the computers, punching in her 10th grade reading level, which produces a list of books appropriate for her ability. Jack London, Jane Austin, George Orwell are among a long list of authors.

After narrowing the list, Alexene finally grabs "A Wind in the Willows," the English fantasy classic, off a shelf, checks it out at the front desk and stuffs it in her backpack before heading off to the locker room for gym class.

At lunch, Gerry plays football on a narrow slice of sloping and cracked asphalt set between a chain link fence and the school gym at Havenscourt.

The boys call for Gerry to hurry up and he trots over to join the defensive line.

He doesn't always eat lunch even though he qualifies for a free lunch in the school's crowded cafeteria, where students often wait 20 minutes or more for their meal. Sometimes Gerry buys snacks at one of two windows outside the cafeteria.

Usually, he just plays football with a couple dozen other boys in the yard. Gerry wants to play football at Skyline High School next year.

Fullback and defensive line, maybe.

The Havenscourt lunchtime pickup game of football is fierce, with crowds of boys converging on the ball or whoever has the ball.

Other students mingle nearby, watching. Some eat cafeteria nachos served in clear plastic bags. One student asks a school administrator for permission to go inside to the library, but the request is denied. The student doesn't have a hall pass signed by a teacher.

After lunch, Alexene changes into gym clothes in the clean but cramped girls locker room. She then jogs, but mostly walks with her classmates around a soft running track circling grass at the far end of a spacious playground at

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Harvest Park. They are then set free to shoot basketball on one of 10 hoops, play field hockey on huge expanses of lawn, exercise on a variety of chin-up and monkey bar structures, or simply run around the litter-free yard.

The school rules prohibit eating or drinking outside the lunch area.

Alexene hits a volleyball against a wall while chatting with a small group of friends for the rest of class.

Three PE teachers monitor the more than 100 students spread out for various activities across the playground.

"I love being with kids," 13-year teaching veteran Esther Swyers says as she watches students play. "I'm set here."

When the bell rings, Alexene and the other girls sprint to the locker room.

Gerry grabs his backpack, discarded hastily on a concrete ledge for the lunchtime football game, and heads for the locker room to change for PE.

The graffiti in the Havenscourt locker rooms looks like it's been there awhile. Half a dozen "crackhead pimps" or "crackhead rules" scrawled in Sharpie black or whiteout litter the walls in the girls locker room. Several "bitches." One "RIP Mellia," a tribute to 15-year-old Tamellia Cobbs, a former student who died in a drive-by shooting about a mile from the school last November.

Dark splotches of old gum dot the floor. Standing water pools in the drinking fountain.

The girls locker room graffiti is more prolific than in the boyslocker room.

"It's a little bit frustrating," Vice Principal Honea says, standing in front of one of the walls filled with graffiti during a quick tour through the now-empty girls changing area. "It's one of many frustrations."

The students then go into the school gym, cast in blindingly yellow light, for roll call before heading out to the playground to run a few laps in lanes delineated by white painted lines on the cracked asphalt.

A 12-foot chain-link fence separates the yard from the city's athletic fields next door. Students are allowed on those fields only when a gym teacher opens the gate, but they aren't given access if the grass is wet or the ballfields are chalked for Little League or adult softball games.

After a half-hearted jog around the playground, Gerry heads back into the gym to play basketball and volleyball while other students play field hockey outside.

On the sidelines, gym instructor Antonio Gulley - a teacher for 17 years - watches students play.

"I like it here," he says. "There's work to be done."

Alexene's sixth-period class is algebra. The class already has finished the textbook with about six weeks of school left, so 14-year teaching veteran Randy Lomas gives the students a worksheet with various mind-bending word problems to solve in teams of four.

Alexene and her three teammates struggle to decipher the answer to one of the questions: "What two whole numbers that contain no zeros multiply together to yield 1 billion?"

"It's easy," Lomas says. "It will take you three seconds once you figure out how to do it."

After about five minutes, one of Alexene's tablemates figures it out.

It's 5 to the 9th power times 2 to the 9th power.

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With a few swift keystrokes on her graphing calculator, Alexene calls out the answer: 1,953,125 and 512.

The bell rings at the end of the 43-minute class, but Alexene and most of the other students don't stir. They are still punching numbers into calculators or scribbling equations with mechanical pencils. Eventually, Alexene gathers her papers and calculator before heading off to seventh-period English class.

Gerry's sixth and final period of the day is pre-algebra with teacher Dove Granese.

Granese again paces the room, asking students to solve equations and put the answer in scientific standard notation.

Gerry works at a problem projected on the board, his brow furrowed, his head hanging a foot over the table. Solve:
[2.3 X 10 LEFTBRACK 6 RITEBRACK][5X10 LEFTBRACK 3 RITEBRACK]

Two students go through the answer on the overhead project: 1.15 X 10 LEFTBRACK 8 RITEBRACK

After a few more similar problems, the hour-long class is almost over.

Gerry rubs his eyes and yawns.

He'll have homework to do later.

"Sometimes it takes me an hour to do my homework," he says.

Homework will have to wait until after a quick trip to McDonald's with friends, Gerry adds, smiling.

But he'll do it. He says he doesn't want to be one of the hundreds of students around him who will drop out before high school graduation day.

"They don't think they have a life in front of them," he says. "I think that's why they drop out." Gerry isn't planning on dropping out.

Again and again and again he has watched the movie "Rudy," the story of Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger, an undersized, blue-collar kid who realizes his dream of playing on the Notre Dame football team. The against-all-odds story with a happy ending is Gerry's inspiration.

Alexene steps into 30-year teaching veteran Janet May's English class - the homestretch of the day at Harvest Park.

Her vocabulary and grammar homework assignment is suspended on the room's television screen, which is connected to May's iMac computer on her desk.

May describes an optional assignment available to students who already have mastered punctuation. After about three weeks of research students will give an oral presentation to classmates.

"Last year, some students couldn't get their PowerPoint presentations to work and it took up too much time," says May, who will retire at the end of the year. "Make sure the technology works before giving your presentation."

Alexene will write her report on American author Pearl S. Buck, whose most famous novel explored the distinctions between the rich and the poor.

At 3:03 the final bell rings for the day, and Alexene heads back to the front of school for the ride home with her mom.

On her way, she passes Ragsdale's computer room. The door is still open.

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"When people tell you that schools aren't as good as they used to be, they're wrong," Ragsdale says, glancing at the 32 eMacs in front of him.

"They're better."

Around the corner from Ragsdale's room is the school's administrative offices. In the far corner, past the desks of a few secretaries, is the door to Principal Jim Hansen's office. Inside, on a waist-high wooden cabinet, placed among other mementos, is a football.

It is signed by Rudy Ruettiger - the "Rudy" in Gerry Silva's favorite movie - autographed after he spoke to some of Hansen's former students.

It includes a simple inscription: "Yes I can."

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